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News

Keith Rogers is the \$450 million farmers' friend

By JOHN FRIEDLEIN

Saturday, January 20, 2007 8:34 PM CST

ARDIN COUNTY — Keith Rogers embodies the new Kentucky.

He drives a Toyota Avalon, made in Georgetown.

His Glendale log home — which is featured in a homebuilder's ad (albeit, manipulated so it looks like it's in the Rocky Mountains) — is a far cry from the cabin that was Abe Lincoln's humble birthplace.

And this former burley producer is helping the state's farmers reduce their dependence on that traditional crop through alternatives such as vegetables and goats.

Rogers is the executive director of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy. Despite having a fancy title, he has stayed close to his roots — even though it has meant a 180-mile round trip commute to Frankfort for the past four years.

While he no longer farms, he still sometimes dons a John Deere cap and works his property in Sonora, bush hogging, making repairs and whatnot.

Not that he has much time to do anything but serve as the main link between the governor and the agricultural community. His main job is to oversee the state's pool of tobacco



JILL PICKETT/The News-Enterprise

Keith Rogers at his farm in Sonora on Saturday. Rogers is the executive director of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy.

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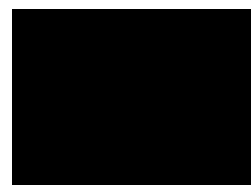
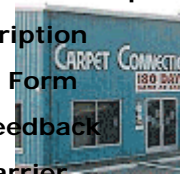
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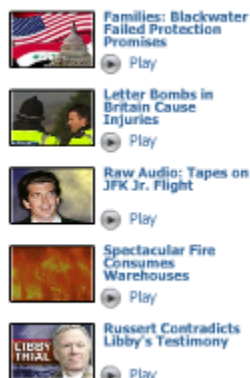
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diversification money — called the Agricultural Development Fund, or the Phase I program.

His agency since 2001 has plowed about \$227 million from the Master Tobacco Settlement Agreement between the states and tobacco companies into projects that are changing the face of Kentucky agriculture.

The tag line Rogers' office uses to describe this investment — "We're breaking records and creating new opportunities" — is more than just hype.

Here's the bottom line. About a decade ago, before the tobacco slump, Kentucky farmers grossed about \$3.3 billion a year. Experts predict 2007 receipts will be a record \$4.3 billion.

Rogers credits much of this increase to the Phase I program, which, when combined with the money farmers used to match the grants, roughly comes to a "mind-boggling" \$450 million. "No other state in the country can point to that kind of investment in that short amount of time," he said.

Specific examples of Phase I contributions include helping make the state a national leader in livestock ID technology and funding education programs that help farmers thrive in this information-intense industry.

These funds, however, won't last forever. They're supposed to be around for about another two decades, though. But they're declining with sagging cigarette sales.

As with the funding, Rogers' position is uncertain. If Gov. Ernie Fletcher isn't reelected, Rogers and his staff of 16 could be replaced.

If that were to happen and Rogers starts growing crops again, the 48-year-old may cause some irrational jitters among the county's producers. It seems they've been blessed with good weather since he idled his tractor four years ago. He joshes them about how they would have enjoyed even more agreeable weather if he had quit earlier.

Joking aside, Rogers had worked the land where he grew up since he graduated from college in the late '70s. Besides tobacco, he grew the typical crops of the area: corn, soybeans and wheat at his Silver Dew Farms. He also ran a large egg operation and raised cattle.

He now leases the property — slightly rolling fields, passed by the occasional Amish buggy — to one of the county's largest producers, Bob Wade Jr.

The first thing Rogers plans to do if he leaves Frankfort will be to clean up the farm — a big





job that will include razing deteriorating henhouses.

He'll probably farm some, maybe start a business and do political consulting (he used to work for U.S. Rep. Ron Lewis).

"Whatever I do," he said, "it'll be related to agriculture."

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